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ABSTRACT

To avoid the costs to the college and its students of making a poor hiring decision, Edison State Community College in Ohio uses the techniques of descriptive interviewing and teaching simulations to select new faculty. In descriptive interviewing, questions focus on how the candidate has actually behaved in real situations rather than on vague philosophical issues and hypothetical solutions to hypothetical problems. For example, during traditional interviews, candidates might be asked to describe a good evaluation system. In a descriptive interview, the candidate would be asked to describe the evaluation system he/she used in the most recent course he/she taught, whether it was normative or criterion-based, and what kinds of tests and exercises were used. Other sequences of questions used at Edison focus on the candidates' past experience with curriculum development and professional activities to maintain discipline currency. Given that even the most informative and revealing interview does not necessarily guarantee a good teacher, the college also uses teaching simulations to asess how well a candidate relates with students and how coherently he/she can deliver information and stimulate thinking. Finalists are asked to choose their own mode of delivery and to cover a small body of material in real or created classes. The evaluation system for the simulation consists of solicited feedback about the candidate's presentation from the students and any non-faculty before the department representative, the division chair, and the search committee meet for discussion. Though pitfalls exist in both methods, the combination offers a more solid base for hiring decisions than does the traditional interview and resume. (JMC)

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HOW TO HIRE GOOD FACULTY

by Sharon Coady

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How to Hire Good Faculty

Colleges across the nation will face still another new challenge in the 1990s -- that of hiring new faculty to replace the legions of those retiring. The art of hiring has declined for many administrators and faculty who, in some smaller departments, have not hired since the early 1970s. The fact that faculty are central to the academic mission means that failure to hire good people can harm an institution for decades. Just as many colleges today are grappling with the effects of poor hires made in the 1960s, so will colleges in the 2020s anguish over any poor hires we make today.

Edison State Community College found that by combining the two modern techniques of descriptive interviewing and teaching simulations, we could greatly reduce the odds of making a poor hire. Based on the success of our hires in the past three years, we believe strongly that hiring faculty need not be an expensive gamble.

The costs and consequences of poor hires are monumental. The hiring process alone can take enormous

amounts of time and cost thousands of dollars. At a minimum, advertisements cost hundreds of dollars; if a national search is conducted, the price rises into the thousands. Hundreds of hours can be spent as members of human resources departments, academic departments, and administration determine criteria, wade through resumes, and interview candidates.

If that expensive, lengthy process has to be repeated one year later because of a poor decision, the institution loses valuable resources and the costs increase dramatically. Most importantly, students pay. A college's inability to place quality instruction in the classroom always takes its toll first on students. But the institution also pays and the college must then make that most awful of decisions: Should the individual be terminated? Much time and effort goes into documenting a fair and honest case. While some individuals accept that decision, others can react with anger, hostility, and even law suits. Yet no matter what the reaction and no matter whether the individual was liked or disliked by other faculty, the termination of an instructor is devastating to faculty morale and uses vast quantities from the reserve of good will which administrators must husband so parsimoniously.

Academic administrators have no other duty that compares in importance to that of hiring new faculty.

The responsibility to find faculty who will meet the college's expectations is critical. When those expectations are rooted in the classroom rather than research, the selection process becomes more difficult. How do you tell whether a candidate can teach? How do you assess the person's ability to contribute to curriculum development? Most resumes do not give many clues. A listing of courses taught does not indicate that they were taught well. A litany of committee memberships does not mean that valuable contributions were made to those committees.

Edison's approach to these problems was rooted in experience using teaching simulations and well-crafted interviews which could delve beneath the superficial vagueness of most search committee questions. The two approaches were combined in a coherent system which identified truly outstanding candidates.

Descriptive Interviewing

In descriptive interviewing the questions asked are significantly different from those used in the typical search committee interview. Rather than focusing on vague philosophical issues and hypothetical solutions to hypothetical problems, descriptive interviewing asks how the candidate has actually behaved in real situations. The difference is critical. Questions

commonly used by many search committees include items such as these:

What is your philosophy of education?

What is the role of a teacher?

What do you think is a good evaluation system?

Such questions do not distinguish between the real performer and the good talker. Descriptive questions, however, assume that past behavior is an indicator of future performance. Candidates are asked to provide highly specific answers to specific questions about past performance. For instance, in a typical interview, the question might be: What do you think is a good evaluation system? A descriptive interview, by contrast, would develop a set of questions that might include the following:

Would you please describe the evaluation system you used in the most recent course you taught?

Was the system normative or criterion based?

What kinds of tests and exercises did you assign?

How much weight did each carry?

The descriptive questions force far more pertinent information. You will have a description of the evaluation system for a course which the candidate might teach for you. You will know how the candidate values

writing, higher level thinking skills, classroom participation, and multiple forms of evaluation. This question sequence also produces answers which reveal how well the candidate balances support for students with rigorous academic standards.

Another example of a descriptive sequence of questions focuses on curriculum development. A typical question from one of our earlier committees asked: How do you think a faculty member should develop a new course? When we converted to descriptive interviewing, that question became this sequence:

> Please describe for us the most recent course which you have developed.
>
> What was the course?
>
> When did you develop it?
>
> What process did you use to define objectives?
>
> What groups did you work with or contact?
>
> How did assignments fulfill the objectives?
>
> How did you evaluate whether the design was successful?

Again, much more information is revealed. You know how recently the candidate actually has done something new, whether he or she is aware of various curriculum design tools, whether the individual sees a course as a complete system rather than an outline of material to be covered. The candidate is forced to indicate whether

goals lead to objectives, objectives to activities, activities to evaluation. You also learn if the candidate is prone to substantively evaluate his or her own work. (More than one candidate has responded to the evaluation of the design by saying that "well, the students seemed to like it.")

For non-research institutions, particularly community colleges, identifying discipline currency is critical since applicants often have a background with no recent scholarship. Yet currency is crucial in rapidly changing fields such as computers, electronics, and the health professions. A descriptive sequence found to be particularly effective is this:

What are the last three books you have read?

To which magazines do you subscribe?

What is the last conference which you attended?

The books question has become a favorite. The truly outstanding candidates have indicated a mix of professional, light, and serious reading. The question gives genuine insight into the individual's range of interests, currency, and intellectuality. (One candidate lost considerable ground when she said she only read how-to manuals.)

By contrast, answers to traditional questions do not direct a response toward the specifics which the

committee may find critical. They also permit the candidate to incorporate clues from the committee into an answer. If the committee has indicated a commitment to writing, the savvy candidate may quickly cite writing in an ideal evaluation system even though he or she seldom requires written work. Most importantly, abstract questions do not address what a candidate thought important enough to actually do.

Descriptive interviewing must take into consideration, however, the fact that some candidates may be new to teaching and cannot cite past performance. Questions should be developed after the long list has been culled from the pool of applicants. Then, taking into consideration the various backgrounds, questions can be phrased to give every applicant an equal opportunity. If a candidate has training but no teaching experience, the curriculum development question can be rephrased to read "presentation or workshop." The evaluation question can be altered to focus on feedback. And, in some rare instances, one must retreat into the conditional and ask what the candidate would do under certain circumstances.

Descriptive interviewing, despite its results, can be difficult for some search committee members to accept. They may not be used to asking crisp, precise questions or they may have favorite questions they have

used for many years. We have found that the initial charge to the search committee is fundamental in setting the tone. We give examples of successful questions from previous searches to committee members and ask the convener to facilitate the question development process by repeatedly asking: "How can we ask that in behavioral terms?" Committees also try to be sensitive to individual members' concerns and sometimes include a few non-behavioral questions if the critical areas are addressed through descriptive questions.

Teaching Simulation

The most informative, revealing interview in the world does not necessarily guarantee a good teacher, however. We concluded that, as a teaching institution, we needed to be sure we were hiring people who could actually perform in the classroom. The teaching simulation shows us how well a candidate relates with students and how coherently he or she can deliver information and stimulate thinking.

To implement the simulations, we first drafted policies and procedures, being careful to stipulate that all candidates would be treated equally and that no candidate could be exempted from the process unless the college previously had evaluated that person's teaching ability and that documentation was on record.

The process is relatively simple. After the

interviews, the search committee decides on one or more finalists who are then invited to simulations. The faculty prepares objectives covering a small body of material which can be taught in 20 to 30 minutes. We deliberately leave the mode of delivery to the candidate in order to evaluate how creative the person can be. We do offer to provide any desired special equipment.

Although we prefer to place the candidate in an on-going class, timing does not always permit that. We frequently have created "classes" of secretaries, paraprofessionals, and any students we can find. The division chair, as the person responsible for hiring and supervising the new faculty member, always sits in as does at least one faculty member from the department. Other search committee and faculty members attend if their schedules allow.

Our evaluation system is informal. We solicit feedback from the students and any non-faculty before the department representative, the division chair, and the search committee meet to discuss the candidate's presentation. The criteria for assessing the interview and the teaching simulation are identified in advance, but no formal, written evaluation is used for the simulation or the interview. Each member of the search committee who participated gives his or her opinion and this information is then synthesized with the interview

conclusions in order to reach a decision.

The results of this process have been dramatic. We have observed that:

--We can identify a good teacher in the first five minutes. Nothing substantively changes after that. In deference to the candidate's effort, however, and out of concern that someone may encounter stage fright in the early minutes, we continue to allot 20 to 30 minutes for the presentation.

--Interviews give few clues as to teaching performance. They may reveal knowledge of discipline and pedagogy but they do not reveal skill. Some of the finest interviewers failed in the classroom with a total lack of eye contact, a boring monotone, or an incoherent delivery. We operate on the assumption that if we who are vitally interested in the presentation are bored, then students surely will be.

--Even persons who are nervous perform well if they are inherently good teachers. Successful candidates have said later that they were terribly nervous yet they overcame it. We do not consider this unfair. The average teacher is asked to deliver quality instruction under many difficult circumstances -- illness, family problems, noisy construction workers outside the window, the presence of peer evaluators. The true professional rises to the occasion.

Our successful candidates have shared several characteristics. They usually have learned and used the names of several people in the room before their 20 minutes ended. Although this may seem insignificant, we consider it a sign of liking students. Our successes also have been able to interest outsiders in their subject. One security guard who had been enlisted for a criminal justice candidate's presentation later enrolled in the program as a result of the candidate's enthusiasm. When we had to ask that same "class" to leave because their questions had kept the candidate far past her designated time, we felt sure we had a winner.

Pitfalls certainly exist in using simulations. Not everyone believes in the process initially and some effort must be put into giving the process legitimacy. If the administrator in charge does not set a serious tone, the process can easily degenerate into a casual, unimportant ritual which has the potential for more damage than good. Also, practice is needed in developing objectives which someone can reasonably meet in 20 to 30 minutes. In our early attempts, we often erred by giving a candidate too much to accomplish. Finally, careful attention must be given to introducing the candidate to the class. We first explain to the candidate whether the class is an on-going or artificially created one and carefully explain why we

feel the process is important, stressing that as a teaching institution we place great value on the interaction between teachers and students. We also tell the class exactly what is happening and emphasize that the we and the candidate are looking at each other.

Student reaction has been highly satisfying. Students in almost every instance have agreed with our judgment and were flattered to be part of the process. When we have had to bring in multiple finalists, students have vied to be part of the simulation for the second and third candidates. Students often have stopped search committee members on campus later and reasserted their opinions. "I sure hope you don't hire that one" or "You're going to hire him, aren't you?" are common comments. For jaded faculty and administrators, who thought students wanted only an easy ride, this concern was highly gratifying. Students do care about their education -- and about who delivers it.

Conclusion

Edison's experience with descriptive interviewing and teaching simulations indicates to us that hiring can be less risky than commonly supposed. While far from foolproof, this combination of techniques offers a more solid base for decisions than does the traditional interview and resume. In an environment where teaching ability and interaction with others is critical, this

emphasis on behavioral patterns and actual performance provides highly useful information.

Reference

For a good introduction to descriptive interviewing, see: Janz, T., Hellervik, L, and Gilmore, D. (1986). Behavior Description Interviewing. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

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